

The meaning of the words *sūra*, *āyat*, *kalima* (word) and *ḥarf* (letter)

The word “*sūra*” which means chapter, wall or fence in Arabic is used in the Qur’ān to make each chapter clear and distinct from every other *sūra*. The chapters are called that because in them one ascends from one degree to the next. It is said that they are called that because of their honour and elevation, as is said of walls which are raised up in the land. It is said that they are called that because the one who reads them looks forward at what lies ahead, like the walls of a building. All these are without *hamza*. It is said that they are called that because they are cut out from the Qur’ān on their own, as the Arabs call a leftover *su’r*. In that case the word would have a *hamza* which was replaced with a *wāw*. It is said that

they are called that because of their completion and perfection as this word is used for a fine camel.

An *āya*[t] is a sign. It is a sign since it is separate and distinct from the words before it and the words after it; it is clear from other signs and is on its own. It can mean a proof or token. It is said that it is called that because it is a collection of letters of the Qur'ān, as one says, "The people went forth with their full company (*āya*).” It is said that it is called *āya* because it is a wonder which people are unable to imitate.

Grammarians disagree about the root of *āya*. Sibawayh said that it is *ayaya* and because the *yā'* is vowelised and has a *fatha* before it, it becomes *alif* and so it is *āya*. Al-Kisā'ī said that its root is *āyaya* and the *yā'* accepts the *alif* with a *fatha* before it and is elided because they are similar. Al-Farrā' says that its root is *ayyaya* and it accepts the *alif* out of dislike of the doubling and becomes *āya*.

As for the word *kalima*, it is a composite structure which is made up of a mixture of letters. The longest words in the Book of Allah are eleven letters long, like "*la-yastakhlifannahum*" (24:55) and "*a-nulzimukumūhā*" (11:28) and the like. As for "*fa-asqaynākumūhu*" (15:22), it is ten in writing and eleven in articulation. The shortest have two letters, like *mā*, *lā*, *laka*, *lahu*, and the like. Some words are just one letter, such as the interrogative *hamza* and the conjunctive *wāw*, but are not spoken alone.

Sometimes a complete *āyat* is comprised of a single word, as in "*wa'l-fajr*", "*wa'd-duḥā*", and "*wa'l-ʿaṣr*". That is also the case in "*alif-lām-mīm*", "*alif-lām-mīm-ṣād*", "*ṭā-hā*", "*yā-sīn*", and "*ḥā-mīm*" according to the Kufans. That occurs at the beginnings of *sūras*, but not inside them. Abū 'Amr ad-Dānī said, "I do not know of any word which on its own is an *āyat* except for '*mudhāmmatān*' in *Sūrat ar-Raḥmān* (55:64)." Two words may become connected and be two *āyats*, as in "*ḥā-mīm. ʿayn-sīn-qāf*" according to the Kufans.

It is possible that elsewhere a single word may stand for a complete and self-sustaining *āyat*. Allah says, "*The most excellent Word of your Lord was fulfilled for the Tribe of Israel for their*

steadfastness.” (7:137) It is said that “word” here refers to Allah’s words: “*We desired to show kindness to those who were oppressed in the land...*” (28:5-6) The Almighty says, “*He bound them to godfearing self-restraint (lit. word of taqwā)*” (48:26). Mujāhid said that the “word” is: “*There is no god but Allah.*” The Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, “Two words are light on the tongue, heavy in the balance, beloved to the Al-Merciful: ‘Glory be to Allah and by His praise. Glory be to Allah, the Immense.’” The Arabs sometimes call an entire ode and story a “word”.

The word *ḥarf* (letter) is the shape which stands alone in a word of which it is made up. A letter can be called a word and a word a letter as we made clear. Abū ‘Amr ad-Dānī said, “Are the letters of the alphabet at the beginnings of *sūras*, such as *ṣād*, *qāf*, and *nūn* letters or words? I say that they are words, not letters. That is because a letter is not unvowelled nor is it alone in a *sūra* nor separate from what is mixed with it. But these are unvowelled, alone, separate, like words which are distinct.”